



Are we there yet?

Two artists documented the U.S.'s changes by retracing their cross-country road trip of 35 years ago.

By JIT FONG CHIN
SqueezeOC.com

“Progress: In Search of the American Esthetic”

Where: [Grand Central Art Center](#), Santa Ana

When: Continues through Oct. 22. Gallery opens 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and Sunday, and 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Closed Monday.

Cost: Free.

Info: 714-567-7233 or [grandcentralartcenter.com](#) or [progress2005.us](#)

Extras: The center's rental and sales gallery is showing “FM Rides Alone,” a group exhibition of lowrider bikes, curated by Fat Mark. The center's project room is screening short art films in a festival organized by Rat Powered Films, “Take Off Your Coat. Stay Awhile.”

During one tediously long seminar at Cal State Fullerton, art students Michael Davis and Stephen Moore decided they'd much rather learn about art outside the classroom. They decided to drive from Orange County to New York City, where they would meet curators and artists.

It was 1970. Once the duo got into Moore's Chevy Nova, they realized the road trip itself, not just the destination, was something worth chronicling. They filmed the drive, made audio recordings of what they heard on the radio, and collected ephemera.

In 2005, the pair repeated the trip, but this time drove from New York to California.

The artists' records and art installations are now on display in the exhibition titled "Progress: In Search of the American Esthetic." As you might have guessed, the artists picked the word "progress" not so much to praise the country's achievements, but to question whether Americans have made the right social, economic and political choices over the past 35 years.

One hallway in the exhibition is lined with newspapers superimposed with images that represent the 1970s and 2005. Bush smiles across Nixon. Iraq faces Vietnam. Osama Bin Laden sits across the hydra-symbol of the Symbionese Liberation Army. The artists' statements aren't exactly subtle, but they do effectively convey a sense of déjà vu and dread.

In 1970, the artists worried that the growth of chains like Denny's would negatively alter the country's landscape. They left the freeways many times to visit small towns like Clinton, Oklahoma, and Winslow, Arizona, that they feared wouldn't be there in a few years.

In 2005, the men noticed the proliferation of chains had intensified. "I interviewed a woman in Frankfurt, Kentucky. She said she was from here, and she hadn't been here for five years, and she drove 20 miles past," said Davis, who now lives in San Pedro and works as a sculptor.

"She didn't recognize the off-ramp. This used to be, just four years ago, rolling hills and Kentucky horse farms. They've been totally replaced by this terrible series of malls – there was Wal-Mart, Lowe's, every single fast food you could imagine."

The artists noticed a lot more Spanish on the airwaves in 2005, but a lot less variety otherwise. "Radio has now been so co-opted. In 1970, you really heard a variety of music from different time periods. What we picked up on this trip in 2005 was, there is a real narrow band – it was '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s music, along with really a lot of religious fundamentalism and conservative radio talk shows," Davis said.

While the artists saw that some of the small towns they saw 35 years earlier had deteriorated, they were surprised that several had remained resilient.

"You can go to cities and see that they're trying to save their small downtowns, like Santa Ana, by allowing artists to come in and do something with these spaces. We saw that with many cities. Even Clinton, Oklahoma, was holding on to this vestige of the past, but was being invigorated by these young people, taking over spaces, opening up stores," Davis said.

"I think we left kind of pessimistic in 1970, and we're optimistic but pessimistic now."

Comments

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